

Literature, &c.

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A SCENE FROM IRISH LIFE.

THE moorland was wide, level, and black; black as night, if you could suppose night condensed on the surface of the earth, and that you could tread on solid darkness in the midst of day. The day itself was fast dropping into night, although it was dreary and gloomy at the best; for it was a November day. The moor, for miles around was treeless and houseless; devoid of vegetation, except heather, which clad with its gloomy frieze coat the shivering landscape. At a distance you could discern, through the misty atmosphere, the outline of mountains apparently as bare and stony as this wilderness, which they bounded. There were no fields, no hedgerows, no marks of the hand of man, except the nakedness itself, which was the work of man in past ages; when, period after period, he had tramped over the scene with fire and sword, and left all that could not fly before him, either ashes to be scattered by the savage winds, or stems of trees, and carcasses of men trodden into the swampy earth. As the Roman historian said of other destroyers, 'They created solitude and called it peace.' That all this was the work of man, and not of Nature, any one spot of this huge and howling wilderness could testify, if you would only turn up its sable surface. In its bosom lay thousands of ancient oaks and pines, black as ebony; which told, by their gigantic bulk, that forests must have once existed on this spot, as rich as the scene was now bleak. Nobler things than trees lay buried there; but were, for the most part, resolved into the substance of the inky earth. The dwellings of men had left few or no traces, for they had been consumed in flames; and the hearts that had loved, suffered, and perished beneath the hand of violence and insult, were no longer human hearts, but slime. If a man were carried blindfold to that place, and asked when his eyes were unbanded where he was he would say—'Ireland!'

He would want no clue to the identity of the place, but the scene before him. There is no heath like an Irish heath. There is no desolation like an Irish desolation. Where Nature herself has spread the expanse of a solitude, it is a cheerful solitude. The air flows over it lovingly; the flowers nod and dance in gladness; the soil breathes up a spirit of wild fragrance, which communicates a buoyant sensation to the heart. You feel that you tread on ground where the peace of God, and not the 'peace' of man created in the merciless hurricane of war, has sojourned: where the sun shone on creatures sporting on ground or on tree, as the Divine Goodness of the Universe meant them to sport; where the hunter disturbed alone the enjoyment of the lower animals by his own boisterous joy; where the traveller sung as he went over it, because he felt a spring of inexpressible music in his heart; where the weary wayfarer sat beneath a bush, and blessed God, though his limbs ached with travel, and his goal was far off. In God's deserts dwells gladness, in man's deserts death. A melancholy smites you as you enter them. There is a darkness from the past that envelopes your heart, and the moans and sighs of ten-times perpetrated misery seem still to live in the very winds.

One shallow, and widely-spread stream struggled through the moor; sometimes between masses of gray stone. Sedges and the white-headed cotton-rush whistled on its margin, and an island-like expanse that here and there rose above the surface of its middle course.

I have said that there was no sign of life; but on one of those gray stones stood a heron watching for prey. He had remained straight, rigid, and motionless for hours. Probably his appetite was appeased by his day's success among the trout of the dark red-brown stream, which was colored by the peat from which it oozed. When he did move, he sprang up at once, stretched his broad wings, and silent as the scene around him, made a circuit in the air; rising higher as he went with slow and solemn flight. He had been startled by a sound. There was life in the desert now. Two horsemen came galloping along a highway not far distant, and the heron, continuing his grave gyrations, surveyed them as he went. Had they been travellers over a plain of India, an Australian waste the Pampas of South America, they could not have been grimmer of aspect, or more thoroughly children of the wild. They were Irish from head to foot.

They were mounted on two spare but by no means clumsy horses. The creatures had marks of blood and breed that had been introduced by the English to the country. They could claim, if they knew it, lineage of Arabia. The one was a pure bay, the other and lesser was black; but both were lean as death, haggard as famine. They were wet with the speed with which they had been hurried along. The soil of the damp moorland, or the field in which, during the day, they had probably been drawing the peasant's cart, still smeared their bodies, and their manes flew as wildly and untrimmed as the sedge of the cotton-rush on the wastes through which they careered. Their riders, wielding each a heavy stick instead of a riding whip which they applied ever and anon to the shoulders or flanks of their smoking animals, were mounted on their bare backs, and guided them by halter, instead of bridle. They were a couple of the short frieze-coated, knee-breeches

and gray-stocking fellows who are as plentiful on Irish soil as potatoes. From beneath their narrow-brimmed, old, weather-beaten hats, streamed hair as unkempt as their horses' manes. The Celtic physiognomy was distinctly marked—the small and somewhat upturned nose; the black tint of skin; the eye now looking gray, now black; the freckled cheek and sandy hair. Beard and whiskers covered half the face, and the short square-shouldered bodies were bent forward with eager impatience, as they thumped and kicked along their horses, muttering curses as they went.

The heron, sailing on broad and seemingly slow vans, still kept them in view. Anon, they reached a part of the moorland where traces of human labor were visible. Black piles of peat stood on the solitary ground, ready, after a summer's cutting and drying. Presently patches of cultivation presented themselves; plots of ground raised on beds, each a few feet wide, with intervening trenches to carry off the boggy water, where potatoes had grown, and small fields where grew more stalks of ragwort than grass, inclosed by banks cast up and tipped here and there with a briar or a stone. It was the husbandry of misery and indigence. The ground had already been freshly manured, by sea-weeds, but the village—where was it? Blotches of burnt ground; scorched heaps of rubbish, and blackened walls alone were visible. Garden-plots were trodden down, and their few bushes rent up, or hung with tatters of rags. The two horsemen, as they hurried by with gloomy visages, uttered no more than a single word: 'Eviction!'

Further on, the ground heaved itself into a chaotic confusion. Stony heaps swelled up here and there, naked, black, and barren; the huge bones of the earth protruded themselves through her skin. Shattered rocks arose, sprinkled with bushes, and smoke curled up from what looked like mere heaps of rubbish, but which were in reality human habitations. Long dry grass hissed and rustled in the wind on their roofs (which sunk by places, as if falling in); and pits of reeking filth seemed placed exactly to prevent access to some of the low doors; while to others, a few stepping stones made that access only possible. Here the two riders stopped, and hurriedly tying their steeds to an elder-bush, disappeared in one of the cabins.

The heron slowly sailed on to the place of its regular roost. Let us follow it.

Far different was this scene to those the bird had left. Lofty trees darkened the steep slopes of a fine river. Rich meadows lay at the feet of woods and stretched down to the stream. Herds of cattle lay on them, chewing their cuds after the plentiful grazing of the day. The white walls of a noble house peeped, in the dusk of night, through the fertile timber which stood in proud guardianship of the mansion; and broad winding walks gave evidence of a place where nature and art had combined to form a paradise. There were ample pleasure grounds. Alas! the grounds around the cabins over which the heron had so lately flown, might be truly styled pain-grounds.

Within that home was assembled a happy family. There was the father, a fine looking man of forty. Proud you would have deemed him, as he sat for a moment abstracted in his cushioned chair; but a moment afterward, as a troop of children came bursting into the room, his manner was instantly changed into one so pleasant, so playful, and so overflowing with enjoyment, that you saw him only as an amiable, glad, domestic man. The mother, a handsome woman, was seated already at the tea-table; and, in another minute, sounds of merry voices and childish laughter were mingled with the jocose tones of the father, and the playful accents of the mother; addressed, now to one, and now to another of the youthful group.

In due time the merriment was hushed, and the household assembled for evening prayer. A numerous train of servants assumed their accustomed places. The father read. He had paused once or twice, and glanced with a stern and surprised expression toward the group of domestics, for he heard sounds that astonished him from one corner of the room near the door. He went on—Remember the children of Edom, O Lord, in the day of judgment; how they said, Down with it, down with it, even to the ground. O daughter of Babylon, wasted with misery, yea, happy shall he be who rewardeth thee, as thou hast served us!

There was a burst of smothered sobs from the same corner, and the master's eye flashed with a strange fire as he again darted a glance toward the offender. The lady, looked equally surprised, in the same direction; then turned a meaning look on her husband—a warm flush was succeeded by a paleness in her countenance, and she cast down her eyes. The children wondered but were still. Once more the father's sonorous voice continued—'Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us.' Again the stifled sound was repeated. The brow of the master darkened again—the mother looked agitated; the children's wonder increased; the master closed the book, and the servants, with a constrained silence, retired from the room.

'What can be the matter with old Dennis?' exclaimed the lady, the moment that the door had closed on the household—'O! what is amiss with poor old Dennis?' exclaimed the children.

'Some stupid folly or other,' said the father, morosely. 'Come! away to bed, children. You can learn Dennis's troubles another time.' The children would have lingered, but again the words, 'Away with you!' in a tone

which never needed repetition, were decisive: they kissed their parents and withdrew. In a few seconds the father rang the bell. 'Send Dennis Croggan here.'

The old man appeared. He was a little thin man, of not less than seventy years of age, with white hair and a dark spare countenance. He was one of those many nondescript servants in a large Irish house, whose duties are curiously miscellaneous. He had, however, shown sufficient zeal and fidelity through a long life, to secure a warm nook in the servants' hall for the remainder of his days.

Dennis entered with an humble and timid air, as conscious that he had deeply offended: and had to dread, at least, a severe rebuke.—He bowed profoundly to both the master and the mistress.

'What is the meaning of your interruptions during the prayers, Dennis?' demanded the master abruptly. 'Has any thing happened to you?'

'No, sir.'

'Anything amiss in your son's family?'

'No your honor.'

The interrogator paused; a storm of passion seemed slowly gathering within him.—Presently he asked in a loud tone, 'What does this mean? Was there no place to vent your nonsense in, but in this room, and at prayers?'

Dennis was silent. He cast an imploring look at the master, then at the mistress.

'What is the matter, good Dennis?' asked the lady in a kind tone. 'Compose yourself and tell us. Something strange must have happened to you.'

Dennis trembled violently; but he advanced a couple of paces, seized the back of a chair as if to support him, and, after a vain gasp or two, declared as intelligibly as fear would permit, that the prayer had overcome him.

'Nonsense, man!' exclaimed the master with fury in the same face, which was so lately beaming with joy on the children. 'Nonsense! Speak out without more ado, or you shall rue it.'

Dennis looked to the mistress as if he would have implored her intercession; but as she gave no sign of it, he was compelled to speak; but in a brogue that would have been unintelligible to English ears. We therefore translate it:

'I could not help thinking of the poor people at Rathbeg, when the soldiers and police cried, "Down with them; down with them, even to the ground;" and then the poor bit cabins came down all in fire and smoke, amid the howls and cries of the poor creatures.—Oh, it was a fearful sight, your honor—it was indeed—to see the poor women hugging their babies, and the houses where they were born burning in the wind. It was dreadful to see the old bedridden man lie on the wet ground among the few bits of furniture, and groan to his gracious God above. Oh, your honor, you never saw such a sight, or—you—sure a—it would never have been done.'

Dennis seemed to let the last words out, as if they were jerked out of him by a sudden shock.

The master whose face had changed during this speech to a lived hue of passion, his eyes blazing with rage, was in the act of rushing on old Dennis, when he was held back by his wife, who exclaimed—'Oswald, be calm; let us hear what Dennis has to say. Go on, Dennis—go on.'

The master stood still, breathing hard to overcome his rage. Old Dennis as if seeing only his own thoughts went on—'O, bless your honor, if you had seen that poor frantic woman when the back of the cabin fell, and buried her infant, where she thought she had laid it safe for a moment, while she flew to part her husband and a soldier, who had struck the other children with the flat of his sword, and bade them to troop off. Oh, your honor, but it was a killing sight. It was that came over me into the prayer, and I feared that we might be praying perdition on us all, when we prayed about our trespasses. If the poor creatures of Rathbeg should meet us, your honor, at Heaven's gate (I was thinking) and say, "These are the heathens that would not let us have a hearthstone in poor old Ireland." And that was all, your honor, that made me misbehave so; I was just thinking of that, and I could not help it.'

'Begone, you old fool!' exclaimed the master; and Dennis disappeared with a bow and an alertness that would have done credit to his earlier years.

There was a moment's silence after his exit. The lady turned to her husband, and clasping his arm with her hands, and looking into his darkened countenance with a look of tenderest anxiety said:

'Dearest Oswald, let me, as I have so often done, once more entreat that these dreadful evictions may cease. Surely there must be some way to avert them, and to set your property right without such violent measures.'

The stern, proud man said: 'Then, why in the name of heaven, do you not reveal some other remedy? why do you not enlighten all Ireland? why don't you instruct Government? The unhappy wretches who have been swept away by force are no people, no tenants of mine. They squatted themselves down, as a swarm of locusts fix themselves while a green blade is left. They obstruct all improvement; they will not till the ground themselves; nor will they quit it to allow me to provide more industrious and provident husbandmen to cultivate it. Land that teems with fertility, and is shut out from bearing and bringing forth food for man, is accursed. Those who have been evicted not only rob me, but their more industrious fellows.'

'They will murder you!' said his wife, 'some day, for these things. They will—'

Her words were cut short suddenly by her husband starting, and standing in a listening attitude.

'Wait a moment,' he said with a peculiar calmness, as if he had just got a fresh thought; and his lady who did not comprehend what was the cause, but hoped that some better influence was touching him, unloosened her hand from his arm. 'Wait a moment,' he repeated, and stepped from the room, opened the door, and without his hat, went out.

'He is intending to cool down his anger,' thought his wife: 'he feels a longing for the freshness of air.' But she had not caught the sound which had startled his quicker, because more excited ear: she had been too much engrossed by her own intercession with him: it was a peculiar whine from the mastiff, which was chained near the lodge gate, that had arrested his attention. He stepped out. The black clouds which overhung the moor had broken, and the moon's light struggled between them.

The tall and haughty man stood erect in the breeze and listened. Another moment, there was a shot, and he fell headlong on the broad steps on which he stood. His wife sprang with a piercing shriek from the door, and fell on his corpse. A crowd of servants gathered about them, making wild lamentations, and breathing vows of vengeance. The murdered master and the wife were borne into the house.

The heron soared from its lofty perch, and wheeled with terrified wings through the night air. The servants armed themselves, and, rushing furiously from the house, traversed the surrounding masses of trees. Fierce dogs were let loose, and dashed frantically through the thickets. All was, however, too late. The soaring heron saw gray figures, with blackened faces, stealing away—often on their hands and knees—down the hollows of the moorlands toward the village; where the two Irish horsemen had, in the first dusk of that evening, tied their lean steeds to the old elder bush.

Near the mansion no lurking assassin was to be found. Meanwhile, two servants, pistol in hand, on a couple of their master's horses, scoured hill and dale. The heron, sailing solemnly on the wind above, saw them halt in a little town. They thundered with the butt-ends of their pistols on a door in the principal street. Over it there was a coffin shaped board, displaying a painted crown, and the big lettered words, 'POLICE STATION.' The mounted servants shouted with might and main. A night-capped head issued from a chamber casement with—'What is the matter?'

'Out with you, police, with all your strength, and lose not a moment. Mr Fitz-Gibbon, of Sporeen, is shot down at his own door.'

The casement was hastily clapped to, and the two horsemen galloped forward up the long, broad street; now flooded with the moon's light. Heads full of terror were thrust out of upper windows to enquire the cause of that rapid galloping; but ever too late. The two men held their course up a steep hill outside of the town, where stood a vast building overlooking the whole place. It was the barracks. Here the alarm was also given.

In less than an hour, a mounted troop of police, in olive green costume, with pistols at holster, sword by side, and carbine on the arm, were trotting briskly out of town, accompanied by the two messengers; whom they plied with eager questions. These answered, and sundry imprecations vented, the whole party increased their speed, and went on, mile after mile, by hedgerow and open moorland, talking as they went.

Before they reached the house of Sporeen, and near the village where the two Irish horsemen had stopped the evening before, they halted, and formed themselves into more orderly array. A narrow gully was before them on the road, hemmed in on one side by rocky steep, here and there overhung with bushes. The commandant bade them be on their guard, for there might be danger there. He was right; for the moment they began to trot through the pass, the flash and rattle of firearms from the thickets above saluted them, followed by a wild yell. In a second, several of their number lay dead or dying on the road. The fire was returned promptly by the police; but it was at random, for, although another discharge and another howl announced that the enemy were still there, no one could be seen. The head of the police commanded his troop to make a dash through the pass; for there was no scaling the heights from this side; the assailants having warily posted themselves there, because at the foot of the eminence were stretched on either hand impassable bogs. The troop dashed forward, firing their pistols as they went, but were met by such deadly discharges of firearms as threw them into confusion, killed and wounded several of their horses, and made them hastily retreat.

There was nothing for it, but to await the arrival of the cavalry; and it was not long before the clatter of horses' hoofs and the ringing of sabres were heard on the road. On coming up, the troop of cavalry, firing to the right and left on the hill sides, dashed forward, and, in the same instant cleared the gully in safety; the police having kept their side of the pass. In fact not a single shot was returned; the arrival of this strong force having warned the insurgents to decamp. The cavalry in full charge ascended the hills, to their summits. Not a foe was to be seen except one or two dying men, who were discovered by their groans.